

San Jacinto River Waste Pits Superfund Site Region 6 - Color-Coded Data Communication Pilot Projects

As part of the Administrator's focus on "expanding the environmental conversation," each Region is exploring the use of color coded data to communicate environmental messages related to Superfund removal and remedial action sites. Region 6 has selected the San Jacinto River Waste Pits Site as its pilot project for both the Time Critical Removal Action and the ongoing Remedial Investigation. Headquarters has requested each Region to provide feedback on its experience utilizing color coded data when communicating with the public, in addition to feedback provided by the public to the Region concerning the color coded data messages.

Questions for the Public:

The following questions were discussed with members of the public as part of a poster session following a September 22, 2011, public meeting in Highlands, TX. Public responses were favorable and are summarized below.

1. How easy was it to understand the messages associated with the colors?

Several of the meeting attendees, ranging from a graduate school student on one end of the spectrum to an elderly resident living near the site on the other, shared their perspectives on the color-coded messages. Consistently, the feedback indicated that the messages were easy to understand. Public comments noted how the GIS maps made it easy to identify the most contaminated areas and to see how the Time Critical Removal Action (TCRA) effectively reduced the public's exposure to those areas.

2. Did you find the specific advice given in the color diagrams useful?

Although somewhat limited, the public comments on this question affirmed the usefulness of the suggested actions. As discussed above, the messages were considered clear and easy to understand. However, there were some comments that the advice given was not substantially different for areas with contamination ranging from red to orange to green. In part, the challenge in differentiating advice based on sediment/soil concentrations of dioxin at/near the site was due to contamination of the water column and fish tissue – issues which were beyond the scope of the TCRA.

3. How could we have improved the communication of this information?

As noted above, the primary question left unanswered in the minds of some meeting attendees was related to the fish advisory that remains in effect notwithstanding the completed TCRA or the ongoing Remedial Investigation. One of the overarching public questions is whether our action made it safe to eat fish/crabs taken from the areas we marked "green." As we explained, our actions to date have stopped the release of dioxin

from the superfund site, but contamination of the fish and crab communities will persist for some time. We might have better communicated our message if we had included a statement advising compliance with the fish advisories in each of the color-categories.

Internal EPA Questions:

The following questions are intended for response by “Ground Level Program Staff” and are due to Headquarters by February 2012.

Internal EPA Questions: Directed at Ground Level Program Staff

- What were the greatest challenges with color-coding? For instance:
 - Difficulty determining the lines to assign between color levels?
 - Difficulty coming to consensus on levels to choose for color-coding among risk assessors, state cleanup levels, ATSDR, removal action levels, etc.?
 - Difficulty with legal counsel regarding wording we put in the document?
 - Finding a public forum to solicit information on the usefulness of color coding?
 - Others?
- Were the benefits of using this communication tool for the public worth the resources invested in the color-coding system for the site?
- Do you have a rough estimate of the time/resources used to implement the system?
- What was your experience using the color-coding data (e.g., did it make communications easier, was it helpful with coordinating with other agencies/responders on the ground)?
- If you are asked to use the color-coding system again, what would you do differently?
- Was the text examined for cultural sensitivity and consideration of English as a Second Language?
- Did the text fulfill the federal mandate for Plain English (Plain Writing Act of 2010) in communication materials?